

Supporting Our Troops: The GI Bill of Rights for the 21st Century

I am a proud cosponsor of H.R.2131, The New GI Bill of Rights for the 21st Century, introduced by colleague, Congressman Chet Edwards. This important bill would improve benefits for our men and women in uniform today and provide long overdue benefits for the veterans and military retirees who have already served.

House Democrats introduced the New GI Bill of Rights for the 21st Century to honor the bravery of our troops and the tremendous sacrifices that their families have made. The New GI Bill will repeal unfair tax burdens on military families, provide Veterans with the benefits they deserve like affordable health care, education and job training, strengthen our support for our men and women in uniform and improve benefits for our National Guard/Reservists.

Bill Summary:

Making health care accessible and affordable for our Veterans.

Currently, more than 50,000 veterans are waiting for more than six months for veterans' health care, and that problem will only get worse with the growing numbers of returning soldiers. Regrettably, the President's budget provides only \$106 million more than last year (excluding new fees), and provides \$18 billion below the amount needed to maintain services at current levels over the next five year. Because of this cut, the number of medical personnel, mostly nurses, serving our veterans would drop by 3,000, and there would be a severe cut in long-term care for our veterans. Democrats would provide an additional \$3.2 billion to meet the demand for current services and medical inflation this year, and will work to ensure that the VA is adequately funded over the next 10 years to ease the waiting periods.

Providing the benefits our veterans have earned and deserve.

The New GI Bill of Rights for the 21st Century would fully repeal the Disabled Veterans Tax, which forces disabled military retirees to give up one dollar of their pension for every dollar of disability pay they receive. This is critical to the nearly 400,000 military retirees who were left behind by the Republican compromise and continue to pay it. It would also include provisions to improve the timeliness and accuracy of veterans' benefit claims; veterans with a service-connected disability claims have a right to expect timely resolution of their appeals as their quality of life depends on it.

Honoring the families of those who made the ultimate sacrifice for our country.

The New GI bill would end the Military Family's Tax that penalizes survivors, mostly widows of those killed as a result of combat. Under current law, widows lose their survivor benefits if they receive the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation benefits because their spouse died of a service-connected injury.

Further, it increases the benefit for surviving children of those who die in service to our country.

Strengthening Support for Men and Women in Uniform

The new GI Bill includes provisions to ensure an adequate number of troops and to make sure they have adequate equipment, so that our troops are well protected and not stretched too thin. More than 340,000 members of the National Guard and Reserves have been called up over the last two and one-half years, and nearly 45,000 soldiers have seen their deployments extended, even as some were scheduled to leave the Army. The package would also provide a \$1,000 bonus to the troops who have served in imminent danger in Operation Iraqi Freedom and in Afghanistan as thanks for a job well done, along with increased pay for senior enlisted personnel.

Honoring Our Debt to Our Servicemen and Women

We must provide first-rate education benefits to reward those who have served and to recruit our most able young men and women to serve our nation in the Armed Forces. The package would modernize and enhance the GI Bill Education and Job Training Programs and improve education benefits for Guard/Reserve. Specifically, it would provide the full cost of tuition and fees, and a living allowance for 36 months of schooling for those who enlist for four years of active duty military service. Right now, the Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) pays less than two-thirds of the average cost of attending a 4-year public college. It would also increase the basic benefit for those currently in the MGIB or who serve less than four years to \$1,300 per month, and eliminate the current reduction in their basic pay to get the educational benefits. Further, it would assist homeless veterans with employment, and protect bonuses and special pay for those who are permanently and severely injured or wounded or killed in service, and continue combat pay and other additional compensation during recovery from combat injuries.

Improving benefits for our National Guard/Reservists

The National Guard and Reserve have made unprecedented contributions – making up about 50 percent of the troops in Iraq, and sometimes having served three tours of duty. The New GI Bill of Rights honors that contribution with provisions that protect their income to help the more than 40 percent of those called up who have suffered a pay cut to serve our country. It also expands military health care to provide full access to TRICARE -- the military health program – to all members of the Guard and Reserve and their families for a low fee. Finally, the package improves recruitment and retention incentives and bonuses for the Reserve, so they are more equitable relative to those for Active duty components. This is not only fairer, but is also needed given the recruiting and retention problems facing the Reserve and National Guard.